

Only Sticks Will Dance

by Rhet Lickliter

Yes, it's true. I live in a basement room and sleep on an old Brunswick pool table. It isn't a very large room, but for my purposes it is, you might say, satisfactory. It is dark, earth encased, with only one small ceiling high window looking in from just above ground level. The white cinder block walls are textured with age and cracks. Paint is crumbling off, forming a border of white dust and chips where floor and walls meet. The yellowing stucco ceiling is low and confining. The cement floor beneath my bed is cold, almost damp, like a big gray slab of ice. Someday I'd like to cover it with linoleum squares that look like gasses being mixed together. Over by one corner is a small enclosed cubby with some sort of engine or pump inside. During the day, it turns on and runs for a few minutes. At night, I lie on my back in the darkness and listen to it drip liquid in soft slow motion. Away, in another room, I can sometimes hear the sound of somebody else's washing machine; the lethargic undulations of the wash cycle, the climactic spinning of the rinse is entrancing, hypnotic.

The pool table is high and strong. A single piece of thick slate is covered by worn, cigarette-burnt, moth-eaten gold felt. I sleep on an old hospital day bed mattress that covers the length of the table and divides its width in half. I keep books in the pockets, paperbacks bent, wedged, and creased: a library of sorts. I have a small brown metal desk lamp, the type with a heavy molded base and a half globe shade. They're connected by a jointed pipe that can be bent or twisted to any desired position, with the flexibility of a dancer's spine. When the frozen cement begins to radiate cold, I bend the lamp over my feet to keep them from going numb.

Up here, on the pool table, I can see the entire room. I'm unable to stand up without stabbing my head with stucco, but I am able to crouch or sit up. Mostly, I lie on the mattress watching, listening, wondering. Next to me on the pool table sits my television, an RCA nine-inch black and white portable, equipped with all the adjustment and fine tuning knobs. Without the use of an aerial, it picks up all the local channels. But it doesn't say Victor. Their old products used to always say Victor right under the RCA.

The first television I ever had was a beautiful mahogany veneer RCA Victor floor model. I grew up with that T.V.; the reception wasn't very good, but it was always my favorite piece of furniture. Because of that set, I've never made the adjustment to colour. The colour T.V.s are just too real, overly so. The world outside is hardly ever like the one inside those things. It's the black and white television that gives a truer, more realistic view of the world. Think about it. If it isn't overcast, it's partly cloudy with a chance of rain. There's nothing like a good black and white set. Next to the RCA is my Admiral A.M. At night, I tune in some old jazz, lie on my back, and stare up at where the ceiling should be. I have a hard time remembering the titles of songs, or who played them, but I do remember the tunes and I sing along out loud. Here in the darkness, the basement seems much larger and always colder. The sounds of the pump and somebody else's washing machine drift in, layering over the music from the radio. During the day, I usually watch game shows or soap operas. I prefer old re-runs, when they're on. Most of all, I prefer to



experiment. I turn the volume down on the RCA, and listen to the Admiral while I watch some old show or movie. It's amazing the way different songs can change the mood of a show. Sometimes I distort the picture with the knobs, or turn to a channel that isn't receiving and watch and listen. Lately, I've been turning the T.V. off around four o'clock in the afternoon.

Through the small, ceiling high window, the sun will show through and cast shadows of leaves and sticks from the outside, onto the white cinderblock wall. The shadows move and I know the wind is blowing. I listen to the Admiral and watch the two-dimensional foliage dance on the wall. A breeze passes through the limbs and a young girl tosses her hair. In a storm, the branches thrash and bend and break as if they are struggling to tear themselves up from the roots and escape with the relentless wind. As I watch and listen, I become an emotional participant. I hear the sounds: music, pump, washing machine. I see the shadows struggle; I feel the roots being torn from my stomach.

Now it is Autumn. The black leaves are falling down the white cinder block wall one by one. Soon, only sticks will dance. Everyday a temporary painting appears on my wall and everyday it changes. Already the shadows grow long and distorted. I listen to the Admiral, the pump, somebody else's washing machine. I live in a basement room and sleep on an old Brunswick pool table.